

116. BLACK THEOLOGY:  
“*The Unfinished Agenda*”

(1989)

BARBARA J. ESSEX

*Barbara J. Essex (b. 1951) is an African American UCC minister educated at Northwestern University and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. She served on the staff of Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago (1979–83) (see vol. 7:118). After doing interim ministry in Chicago (1985–86) she became secretary for racial and ethnic ministries for the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM) (1986–91). During the 1990s she was an adjunct faculty member at Hartford Seminary, an executive for the Presbytery of Chicago, an instructor at the American School, Lansing, Illinois, and administrative director for a national leadership program sponsored by Hartford Seminary and Pacific School of Religion. In 1999 she became minister and coordinator of community life at PSR. She is the author of *Bad Girls of the Bible: Exploring Women of Questionable Virtue* (1999).*

*Essex explains the connection between black theology and the Amistad incident in the nineteenth century. She argues that black theology is “the philosophical framework for examining the past, present, and future of Black African-Americans.”*

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## The Unfinished Agenda

*"Wicked people want to make us slaves but the Great God who made all things raise up friends for Mendi people, he gave us Mr. Adams that he may make me free. . . ."*  
(Kali, *Amistad* captive)

This statement by the African captive, Kali, is the one continual cry of African-Americans since arriving upon these shores as slaves. The *Amistad* incident highlights some important aspects of modern Black Theology. The *Amistad* captives wanted to be free and to return to their homeland. In the midst of their captivity, they recognized their common lot, and they knew the importance of working together despite their differences in language and backgrounds. The reality of the slave trade made them sisters and brothers and unified them in a special way.

The Black American experience is the odyssey of a people and a great adventure of the human spirit. No American can understand her/himself or this country without a serious confrontation with the multifaceted images of Black life. The notion of a Black Theology is not a creation of the twentieth century. Indeed, efforts to evoke loyalty, pride, identity and spirituality date back to the very beginnings of the slave trade. Sengbe and his fellow captives expressed in poignant terms the cry of Africans in the American Diaspora: liberation!

Even before their actions, Blacks were living the roots of Black Theology.

Black Theology is the philosophical framework for examining the past, present, and future of Black African-Americans in the United States. It is rooted in the Black Church. This discussion is based on the following assumptions:

- that the "Black Church" refers to the institutions within the Christian faith;
- that each indigenous group must define and refine its own theology; that is, any group that is spatially and/or socially isolated must write its own theology;
- that Christianity is essentially a religion of redemption and liberation;
- that Christianity is fundamentally different from white American Protestantism;
- that theology is shaped and influenced by an understanding of culture and history; that is, there is a historical context for theology; and
- that theologizing is dynamic because God continues to reveal God's self in history.

"Black Theology," as a methodology, implies inherent unity and oneness. However, it is not a monolith; its perspectives run the gamut from ultra-liberal to ultra-conservative.

In the midst of the diversity, however, there is an undergirding unity. Black Theology is God-talk rooted in the realities of slavery, racism, and discrimination. Black Theology is the attempt to articulate and clarify the African-American community's understanding of God's presence and promise in the midst of a dehumanizing experience. In addition, it is an attempt to explicate the goal to which God is directing creation. Black Theology seeks to answer two questions:

- What was God doing while Blacks were undergoing slavery? and,
- What is God doing now as Blacks struggle for equality, justice, parity, power, and identity?

By necessity, Black Theology has a double thrust; it looks *back* to historical events for meanings, and it looks *forward* to the future with its creative possibilities. Black Theology seeks to understand life's truths in the midst of life's paradoxes. It is not an end unto itself; rather, it is faith seeking understanding and understanding questioning faith.

Black Christians have always sought to expound, interpret, and apply the content of the Christian faith to the specific context of oppression in the United States. Because slaves were not permitted to learn to read or write, Black God-talk, until recently, has been largely an oral theology embedded in songs, prayers, and sermons. Their meanings are rooted in both African *and* American soil. . . .